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26 November 1958

MEMORANDUM TO: Deputy Director (Support)

SUBJECT : Comments on Accidental Sounding of Air Raid
 Warning Equipment on 25 November 1958.

1. As is generally known by this time, the sounding of air raid warning signals throughout the city and in Government buildings yesterday at 4:30 P.M. was caused by a mistake on the part of telephone company workmen who were strapping in the Montgomery County warning system circuit with that of the District of Columbia pursuant to the over-all Metropolitan Area evacuation plan. The situation ensuing therefrom, however, brought about some interesting consequences from our point of view which I am setting forth below, along with my comments thereon.

2. In order to appreciate fully the significance of what happened yesterday it is essential to review briefly the existing air raid warning system for the Washington Metropolitan Area and the different categories of responsibility held by various organizations and officials for carrying it out. To begin with, the Chief Executive has the basic responsibility for making the decision to invoke the relocation plan of the departments and agencies of the Executive Branch to sites outside Washington. In the City of Washington and in the contiguous metropolitan area this basic responsibility includes also the decision to evacuate the civilian populace as a whole. (This differs from the prevailing policy throughout the rest of the country where the decision to evacuate the populace rests solely with state and local officials.) The Chief Executive, in turn, has delegated this responsibility to the Director of the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization, who acts as his direct agent in planning for and executing it. In carrying out this responsibility, the Director of OCDM keeps the command post at High Point in operation at all times, fully staffed. High Point is the nerve center of the nation for this purpose and, as such, it is tied in with the Air Force centers and with all sources of information leading to the making of a decision that an enemy attack is imminent, and that the populace should be ordered to evacuate or to take cover, depending on the time factor involved. When such decision is made, it is the responsibility of the Director of OCDM to sound the alarm. Mechanically, this consists of the sending of the signal from High Point to the country at large through the Federal Civil Defense regions. In the case of the Washington Metropolitan Area, the signal can be transmitted from High Point

direct, and the sounding of the sirens and other air raid warning devices activated thereby, or by transmission of the decision from High Point to Civil Defense Region No. 2 (at Olney, Maryland), from which point the warning devices throughout the Washington Metropolitan Area and in federal buildings are activated by the pressing of a key. This mechanism serves to invoke the relocation of the departments and agencies of the Government simultaneously with the alerting of the public at large.

3. The responsibility to alert and warn the public, including all Government departments and agencies, to evacuate or to take cover, as the case might be, rests solely with the Director of OCDM, by direct delegation from the President, and with him only, as is stated above. It must be understood that the heads of the departments and agencies are not responsible for the sounding of alarms or other alerting devices to their employees. In establishing this system, and in assigning the responsibility thereunder, the National Security Council planners recognized the fact that a decision of such magnitude must be made and transmitted by one authoritative source of command and must be of equal application to all members of the public. Otherwise, a piecemeal evacuation of Government workers of the various organizational elements might cause either a public stampede and consequent disrupting of orderly civil defense plans or public resentment over what might appear to be preferential treatment of one element of the populace.

4. When the signals were sounded accidentally yesterday all persons who heard them had every reason to believe that they were in fact the warning of an anticipated actual attack. I was gratified to learn that the great bulk of our employees, upon hearing the signal, secured their classified materials and proceeded to the designated areas of shelter in their respective buildings. This was predominantly true, notwithstanding the fact that the confusion caused by the accidental sounding of the signals was compounded further by the fact that the signals contradicted themselves in some locations, in that some of the building horn systems first sounded intermittently (indicating Take Cover) and then later sounded the uninterrupted blast which signifies Alert (Evacuation). This situation occurred in about half of the Government buildings in the city, I learned later from officials of OCDM. At the same time most of the outdoor siren signals in Washington sounded the alternating wailing signal used to designate Take Cover, although this point is disputed in some quarters.

5. It should be remembered that, whenever we hear a sounding of the air raid warning signals at any time other than the time of a previously advertised test of such signals, we must assume that the signal is real and that it signifies actual enemy action or ascertained intent thereof. Nevertheless, immediately upon hearing the first

blast of the horn outside my office I called OCDM, who at that precise time were calling High Point to ascertain what the situation was. In about five minutes they called me back and informed me that the signals had been set off accidentally by a mechanical error. Thereupon I relayed this information immediately to the Director of Security, to Mr. [redacted], to the Office of the DD/S (Miss [redacted]) and a few minutes later to Mr. Gates Lloyd), and to [redacted] on behalf of DD/I. Colonel Edwards, in turn, relayed the information to the other buildings through members of his Physical Security staff.


6. Within ten minutes from the time that it was known that the sounding of the signals was accidental the CONELRAD plan was invoked and local radio stations clustered on the 640 and 1240 frequencies were on the air informing the public that a mistake had been made. (This point was disputed later in the press). In this connection it should be remembered that there is no authorized audible All Clear signal provided for. Instead, civil defense plans provide that such information be disseminated by radio and by word of mouth.

7. My personal feeling is that the accidental setting off of these signals has harmed greatly the public's confidence in the system, and that it will tend to make many members of the public feel that a real sounding of the signals might be another mechanical failure or an unscheduled test of some kind. On the other hand, I can see no major lesson to us, as an agency, arising from yesterday's situation, in view of the fact that it was beyond our control and beyond our responsibility, in addition to which we received from OCDM (as pointed out above) the correct information on the situation within a matter of a few minutes after the alarm sounded. On the contrary, there may be some incidental benefits in the form of a general awakening of the Agency consciousness in matters of this kind, unscheduled as it was. In addition, the spirit in which employees at all levels of our Agency accepted the situation was a good sign, coupled, as it was, with the fact that they turned out and did what they believed the signal told them to do. The only complaints which I have heard about the whole situation were mild in nature and concerned the fact that it took a little while to spread the word that the signal was false. I understand that in some instances it was ten or fifteen minutes after I received and passed on the official word from OCDM until it arrived in the shelter areas of some of the buildings. There might, therefore, be some merit in having more radio sets placed throughout our buildings, especially in places close to the designated areas of presumed shelter, for the purpose of listening to CONELRAD announcements in any time of emergency. I also discussed informally with Sheff Edwards the suggestion of installing a loud speaker voice transmission system throughout the hallways and corridors of our buildings such as is found on ship board and over in the Main Navy Building. Such a system, if not prohibitive in cost, would be

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beneficial for a variety of reasons, including the marshalling and direction of employees in case of fire or natural disaster of any kind. He is going to look into the cost and feasibility of such a system, following which, if it appears justified, we shall make some joint recommendations along these lines.

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CIA Emergency Planning Officer

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